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Benjamin Turner: Former Slave, Respected Resident of the St. Paul's Vicinity in the 19th century

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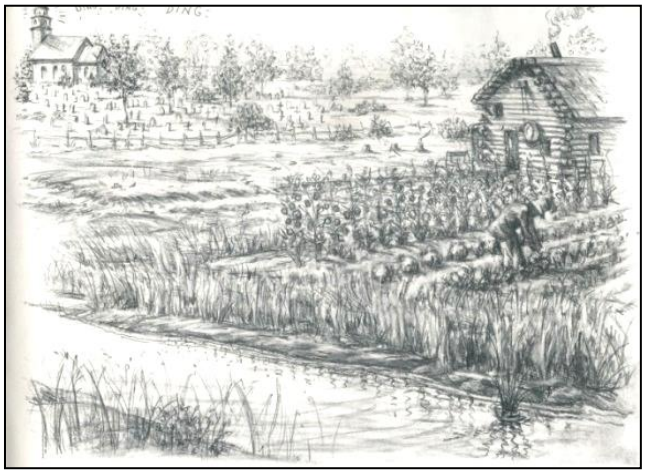
Benjamin Turner was an African American man who lived for several decades in the early 19th century on a small farm adjacent to St. Paul's Church in the town of Eastchester, New York, about 20 miles north of New York City. His poignant biography reflects a local transition from slavery to freedom, the importance of establishing a setting for family stability, and a vanished pre-industrial, rural American experience.

While Benjamin's specific origins are difficult to determine, the 1770 will of a widow named Phoebe Turner offers a likely explanation. A follower of the Quaker faith, Ms. Turner lived in the town of Westchester, about five miles south of the parish of St. Paul's. She declared that upon her death all enslaved people in her possession would have the capacity to choose new masters. This policy eventually led to the manumission or emancipation of the slaves on her farm, including Benjamin Turner, who was just a child in the 1770s.



An artist's depiction of Benjamin Turner on his farm adjacent to St. Paul's Church, alongside Eastchester Creek.

That association with a prominent lower Westchester County family helped create the circumstances for Ben's residence near St. Paul's. His earliest documented presence in this vicinity appears in the early 1800s as the husband of Rebecca, an enslaved woman on the estate of Glorianna Franklin, a wealthy Eastchester widow who was also a Quaker. Ben probably helped obtain Rebecca's freedom in 1810. Originally guests of the parish, they established a homestead on a small strip of land alongside the churchyard with the tacit approval of the community because of Ben and Rebecca's distinguishable affiliations. A subsistence farm was developed and the couple raised a family that eventually encompassed six children. Living on the banks of Eastchester Creek, the Turners supplemented their diet with fish, clams and oysters. While never acquiring written title to the property, Ben's ownership of the land was acknowledged by the community and formalized through the payment of taxes.

This position of independent landowner and respected community member allowed Ben to establish a stable family life, within the prejudicial restrictions that circumscribed African Americans' opportunities in New York. An indication of Ben's respect and trust within the community emerges through a selection he received from the town in 1818. A brief mention in the local records announced that stray animals confiscated as a public nuisance by the Town Pounder would be held at the Turner property pending payment of a fine and return to the rightful owner. The location of Ben's farm at the center of Eastchester, adjacent to the town common, was certainly one reason for this designation.

But this appointment indicates something more substantial. Contemporary references to black people in local records usually listed rewards for returning runaway slaves, outlined procedures for the gradual emancipation of slavery (which continued in New York until 1827) and recorded the requirement that free laborers post good behavior bonds. In this context, the selection represents an extraordinary amount of public confidence placed in a man born into slavery who had been a town resident for less than ten years. Further, this willingness to designate a parcel of his property as the pound -- offering compensated services to the municipality -- suggests Ben's resourceful, flexible approach to sustaining himself and the property.

Living perhaps 100 yards from St. Paul's, Benjamin the Turner family were naturally congregants at the Episcopal Church, the town's sole house or worship. African Americans had participated in the religious activities of the parish since the early 1700s. Clearly, religion functioned as an element of the spiritual and social lives of the Turners, and affiliation with St. Paul's probably confirmed Ben's standing as a credible community member. But in a reflection of the racial climate of the period, his children attended the segregated or all black Sunday school. In all likelihood, they worshipped from benches in the gallery, since pew boxes were parceled out to families based on larger donations. By the late 1830s, after Ben's death, Rebecca Turner joined other families in a growing African American population in the founding of a nearby independent black church.

Probably aged in his mid 60s, Ben passed away in either 1833 or 1834. Until then, he is listed as the guardian of the children in attendance at the town's schools; after that, Rebecca signs as the custodian of the Turner youngsters studying at the public institution, which operated on an integrated basis. While the Ben may be interred in the St. Paul's cemetery, there is no record of such a burial in the parish log.

Benjamin Turner's odyssey recalls the rural past of today's urban, industrial section of Mt. Vernon where St. Paul's Church N.H.S. is situated. He and his wife structured their days around the agricultural cycle, animal husbandry and the fecund adjacent river, with the hearth as the center of family life. Perhaps of greater importance, Ben imparted to his wife, children and grandchildren the importance of land as a means to securing an independent existence, values which sustained the family grounds into the 20th century.